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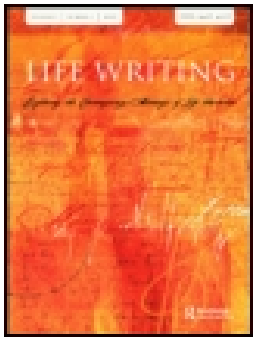
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## The Relational Imaginary of M. G. Vassanji's *A Place Within*

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### ABSTRACT

Currently life writing criticism shows a growing interest in relationality. In the context of lives written after empire, relational dimensions are often fragmented, misremembered and semi-imaginary. This essay explores life writing in a diasporic context, focusing on M. G. Vassanji's travel-self narrative *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (2008). Relational dimensions do not solely encompass human subjects. Selves and subjectivities are formed and transformed by objects and environments. I argue for extending the category of relational life writing beyond the human sphere to include two significant non-human others: books and places and analyse their role in the fraught project of constituting a life in writing.

### KEYWORDS

Life writing criticism;  
relationality; place; Vassanji;  
diaspora

### Introduction

Life writing criticism has been occupied with two major problems for the past decades. The first of these revolves around the question of how to distinguish life writing from fiction. The second might be termed a relational turn: tergiversating from viewing human subjects as autonomous entities, life writing analyses now increasingly regard selfhood as constituted by and responsive to significant others. A general outline of the state of the art suggests that critics currently worry much less about the former and more about the latter. But if formalist and structuralist preoccupations with genre divides have become unfashionable in criticism, this does not necessarily mean that writers of personal narratives have come to terms with blurry boundaries between history, memory and the imagination, nor the partial recognition, misremembrances and paradoxes experienced when trying to fabricate a text based on their own lives. This challenge is arguably exacerbated in the case of lives fractured and multiplied by long-term effects of Empire, such as migration, diaspora and transcultural unbelonging.

In this essay, I reposition the overlapping critical enquiries into the nature, use and potential of life writing in a diasporic context in a travel-self narrative, M. G. Vassanji's *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (2008). As Vassanji's narrative combines a reflection of the nature of life writing with an investigation into a relationship with the author's largely imagined ancestral homeland, it is relational in the open dimensions outlined by sociologists (Gergen *Relational Being*; Donati). I use this text to make a case for extending the category of relational life writing beyond the human sphere. I do this by factoring two

significant non-human others into relationality: books and places. Lives are not just constituted by relations to a formative 'key other person' (Eakin 86), such as a parent or sibling, or other mentor and tempter figures that make up the typical *dramatis personae* of a biography, *bildungsroman* or memoir, or even collective entities such as a family or peer-group. While such inter-human and intersubjective relationships naturally dominate discussions of human selfhood, relationships do not exist solely between human subjects. Selves and subjectivities are formed and transformed by objects and environments. The concept of relationality ought therefore to be opened to include encounters with texts, mediated voices, films, artworks on the one hand, and spaces and places on the other. Uneven and unequal in that these relations rest on one-sided projection and the imagination of just a single human partner, such patterns challenge the notion of the relational as it has become established, in a comfortable dialectical contrast to earlier assumptions about the self as autonomous or monolithic. Relationality conceived beyond the human sphere moreover resituates the narrated self as a confection which is always partly mediated, invented and imagined.

### M. G. Vassanji's stories within stories

Although mainly known as a writer of fiction, being the author of two short story collections and seven novels, M. G. Vassanji lends himself to an investigation of life writing After Empire. For one thing, his life links several Anglophone locations marked by colonialism and decolonisation. Born in Kenya in 1950, he grew up in Tanzania and trained as a nuclear physicist in the USA. He became a resident of Canada in 1978. Struggles with transcultural identity formation, mobility and migration are among the key themes that constitute a family resemblance between Vassanji's writings. His transcultural narratives explore hyphenated diasporic life-worlds that span a variety of chronotopes and connect East Africa, India, the USA and Canada. They tend to occupy a border zone linking history, storytelling, metafiction and self-constitution. Through his fictional works, Vassanji has drawn the attention of an international reading public to the lives of Indian minorities in Kenya and Tanzania, and their complex histories of multiple migrations. His recreations of East Africa during its independence struggles and the personal crises of young migrants of colour in the USA are based on personal memory and have received critical accolades for their detailed realism.

Vassanji's novels depend on a *mise en abyme* of interconnected stories. Fragmentary stories are found in unexpected places: a gunny sack full of mementos that are extracted, one story at a time (*The Gunny Sack*), a diary falling into the hands of a retired teacher triggers research (*The Book of Secrets*), and the feverish memories of a traumatised traveller (*A Magic of Saida*). Books, texts and stories form a connective tissue between characters from different times and places. Reality and story-telling form an interdependent and dynamic web where individual truth is imagined into being with the help of stories. Books are metafictional time-travelling vehicles that carry a sense of belonging across divides of time and place and generate empathy. Meta-texts convey a sense of the transient status of identity or closure. Often, texts stand in for missing parent figures, allowing characters to conduct one-sided dialogues across time and place that help them come to terms with the challenge of inventing coherence in diasporic conditions.

In Vassanji's writing, these transactions operate across the divides between fiction and non-fiction. Many of his novels and short stories make metafictional use of the presence of journals, diaries, letters and other life writing 'foundlings', some fictional, others historical, to introduce layers of meaning, and to trigger plots and journeys. By understanding the motivations of unknown storytellers, the lost and forgotten writers of diaries and letters, Vassanji's protagonists are led to examine and comprehend their own motivations. To learn about the past and to own its murky aspects are strategies that help define the relations with the here and now. Life writing is a metatextual representative of a diasporic subject: scattered across the pages, dissected and removed from their context or 'home', Vassanji's migrant characters connect implications of different texts while being set off from the main body of the text, signalling unbelonging, or plural belongings. Pieces of life writing function as a recurring trope that invites readers of Vassanji's novels to question the veracity and authenticity of any document.

And yet, his disjointed plots almost always converge on the monologic presence of a central protagonist figure, often an individual in search of himself or a missing lover or ancestor. Even in their articulations of dislocation, his frame narrators constitute hierarchical presences who make the many anecdotes assembled in Vassanji's novels as ancillary to a large-scale plot of finding, or constructing, a sense of truth, learning by telling. Vassanji's polyphonic technique allows a deceptive authority of a dominant voice as even the most assertive of his narrator protagonists find themselves displaced and alienated by relentless historical developments and hegemonic structures. The multitude of stories serves as a window-dressing for an endeavour which is ultimately monologic.

A case in point is Vassanji's most recent novel: *The Magic of Saida* (2013) unravels the memories of an East African physician resident in Canada who travels to Tanzania in the attempt to reconnect with his childhood sweetheart. Although the protagonist Kamal's quest is broken by numerous flashbacks that bring the eponymous heroine's story to life, it is *his* image of Saida which is related and refracted through a transmogrified image of a Mother Tanzania. Readers witness a male protagonist's search for closure. They never hear Saida's voice. Although an encounter between the former lovers seems to take place, the scene is delivered in the form of a feverish passage with overtones of both *Heart of Darkness* and *Frankenstein*, in which an uncanny witch-creature poisons Dr. Kamal: the creation renders her own narrator unreliable.

### Self-Encounters in *A Place Within*

Whereas Vassanji's fictional works are relatively unapologetic about plying the plots with all-encompassing protagonist figures, his travel narrative dissects such a presence. The multitude of contradictory impressions presented by India leads Vassanji to question his right to impose the subjective views of someone whose relationship with India is tenuous:

on one hand I receive the confidences and treatments due to an insider, one of them; then I become the outsider, someone who doesn't know and has to be protected, someone who hasn't lived close to the fire and felt the heat. (Vassanji 10)

Such considerations are not prompted by postcolonial theorisations of subjectivity, the abject and even diasporic hyphenation.<sup>1</sup> Such discourses are in fact met with distrust by

an author who is so suspicious of labels as to go by his initials in order to escape being assigned to a particular religious group. Vassanji hails from the Ismaili Khoja community of diasporic Indians whose traditions bridge Muslim and Hindu customs, a syncretism that potentially elicits confusion and controversy. Vassanji explains his origins somewhat wearily in his award-winning travel memoir, only to immediately write himself into a genealogy of storytellers:

To tell people that politically and culturally you don't subscribe to this gulf among the same people, and that in matters of faith you were brought up in a very local Indian tradition that was a blend of the two faiths, is to appear naïve or quixotic. It is to meet a blank stare, it is to end a conversation.

I come from a simple Indian village and town folk who happened to follow a line of Muslim mystical singer-preachers, the first of whom, per legend, arrived from the Near East nine hundred years ago and was welcomed in the capital, Patan, of the Gujarat kingdom. (Vassanji 84)

The phrase 'come from' in this passage needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. Vassanji comes to the country he 'comes from' in his early 40s. *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* is based on 10 visits between 1993 and the early 2000s. His personal experience is interspersed with processed images as the author's relationship with India has been prepared by way of family narratives, films and history books. His conflicting impressions of a land which he finds both familiar and alien include topical events such as the aftermath of the 1992 demolition of the Babri Mosque and subsequent riots in Mumbai, as well as subjective meditations on communal violence. Other passages reach back to the Middle Ages to explain the significance of sites and shrines the author finds particularly poignant. Both in Vassanji's fictional works and in his memoir, story-telling, stories and history function both as tools and as subjects of a metatextual enquiry.

In *A Place Within*, Vassanji engages in an autobiographical quest of the sort he has dispatched many of his protagonists on: he is on a journey supposed to enable him to exteriorise something that he knows to be a part of himself, Indianness. To be able to see and touch, smell and imbibe things Indian are acts designed to help him understand the elusive presence of diasporic Indian culture he has grown up with in East Africa. To visit India is to come to terms with relationality itself, with what it means to be connected. These connections are both real and imaginary, historical and emotional.

Many of them are established and sustained through acts of reading. *A Place Within* explores the power of writing to make sense of the random, multifarious and overwhelming experience of life in transit. Just as there are several selves to be choreographed, the book balances multiple images of India. While heterogeneity is to be expected from any portrait of India, Vassanji's episodic narrative is interpenetrated with self-referential reflections on the relationship between that which is experienced and that which is written, and the seductive yet unreliable role of memory as a chaordic force that factors loss of authorial control into an aesthetic principle of life as a quest.

Travelling on a Canadian passport gives him privileges, but it also gives rise to anxieties. Faced with the diversity presented by India, his narrative is acutely mindful of the limitations of a single perspective, and he piles his authorial self-doubts before his readers: 'Do I simply yearn for the exotic, for its shock, to tell myself I have now *been* in India, *really* seen it?', he muses at the outset (Vassanji 6), eliciting nods, perchance a shrug. Awareness of clichés does not preclude them as he demonstrates repeatedly, for instance when

reproducing stereotypes of India as a timeless (read: backward) repository of a particular sensibility: 'Such poetry, such yearning, lives on in the romantic heart of the nation, even as the airwaves and newsprint dazzle and bewitch with the transitory magic of the material' (Vassanji 78). Worse yet:

This is still a land of romance, I tell myself, of song and love. Hearts are still given and taken away. It's a place of signals, with looks, and handkerchiefs and small gestures. A place of laughter. How well do I recognize these, how utterly have I lost them. The cynicism is reserved for politicians, among this middle-class crowd, the irony for foreign consumption. (Vassanji 14–5)

Vassanji self-consciously locates himself on an 'after Empire' stage. As a life writer, he finds himself caught in a double role, as performing actor of his narrative and as its director, facing questions to which only temporary and subjective answers can apply: Is writing, establishing coherence and control, somehow inherently a colonising act? Is essentialism inevitable on a quest for belonging? Being both a representative of Western culture and a diasporic individual, Vassanji experiences ongoing and dislocating shifts of perspective. The visual dimensions of the observer and the seeker on a personal quest are addressed in various places:

On one hand I stood at an objective distance, watching and observing; and yet everything I saw I took personally, conscious all the time. This is India, this is the homeland, to which I am returning on behalf of my family after seventy, eighty, a hundred years. (Vassanji 3)

The encounter with India forces Vassanji to shift between being an authority and a witness, western representative and fellow-postcolonised for the many locals he speaks with. Headless and bereft of the fixed point of a master-narrator, he ponders the question of whether his intense engagement with writing and history ought to be pathologised: 'History is addictive, is an obsession' (Vassanji 53). Being the narrator-protagonist leaves him without a vantage point from which to lay a trail of narrative scraps for the plot to come together.

Vassanji prefaces his portrait of India with an apology reminiscent of a classical chorus sent in before the act, to introduce the plot and beg the reader's indulgence: 'Ever since my first visit, there has been the irrepressible urge to describe my experience of India; yet in spite of copious notes this was not easy, because that experience was deeply subjective, my India was essentially my own creation' (Vassanji ix). Vassanji's modern-day *captatio benevolentiae* immediately launches him into the chief drama of his narrative, the struggle to balance rational and sentimental motivations for writing which he grounds in his diasporic origins.

His imagined homeland is a confection which collapses upon exposure to the real India. Mirroring the literary and autobiographical endeavours of several predecessors and book-shape mentors, notably Nehru and Gandhi, Vassanji uneasily 'locates' his India in the processual vocabulary of quest and discovery, even as he identifies the repetitive circularity of this approach as specious. India challenges his attempts to formulate responses to the people and places he comes across. Subsequent to almost every episode, he is forced to concede that reality outstrips his expectations. His wearied résumé after a particularly humbling encounter is symptomatic: 'this truism keeps playing on my mind, as it has many times before: This country that I've come so brazenly to rediscover goes as deep



as it is vast and diverse. It's only oneself one ever discovers' (Vassanji 321–2). And why would that be worth narrating, unless one wanted to affirm the unique value of that self occupying its particular spot within its specific time and place?

As with inter-human relationships, the questions that arise out of Vassanji's relations with India and his process of coming face to face with his multiple roles suggest a complex relational panorama: often violent feelings of love, fear, curiosity, disgust, shame, exhilaration, surprise, shock, embarrassment, pride, and familiarity accompany his portrait of India and often come into conflict with his ambition to deliver a rational, coherent and persuasive account. Before outlining how these contradictions play out in Vassanji's depiction of place and his writing back to the various works which inspired his imagined India, I would like to pause for a brief consideration of how his struggles with his experiences fit into the paradigm of relationality.

### Relationality beyond the human sphere

Or: paradigms. The concept of relationality seems to lead several separate lives in different disciplines. Derived from sociology, the term has conquered life writing criticism, mostly thanks to Paul John Eakin. Édouard Glissant has developed relationality into a poetological concept to capture the fragmented histories of the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> The term's potential as an analytic tool for an enquiry into life writing after Empire has only received scant attention.<sup>3</sup> In a context at least adjacent to the postcolonial, relationality is a key principle of knowledge organisation in several indigenous cultures of North America, as emphasised by the title of Thomas King's anthology *All My Relations* and theorised, among others, by writers such as Jeannette Armstrong, Richard Atleo/Umeek and Margaret Kovach (King). Peripheral to the advent of relationality in literary criticism is the concept of relational art as developed by Nicolas Bourriaud.

The sociologist Kenneth Gergen investigates the 'generative process of relating' (Gergen *Relational Being* xv) with a view towards promoting an interdependent approach to the self as something connected rather than separate, so as to contribute to a transformation of the competitive workplace and other institutions into more mutually supportive structures.<sup>4</sup> A transfer of ideas about actual society to literary works is aided by the fact that Gergen's book draws on literary works, 'textual companions' (*Relational Being* xvii), and investigates the construction of relationships via chains of emotions (*Realities* 35) and the behaviours through which they are displayed. Texts, narrative scenarios and even fiction constitute common grounds between his work in sociology and the literary analyses of Eakin, and those attempted in this essay.

Both Gergen and Eakin frame relationality as inter-human relations, initially conceived as a binarism of self and other which gradually becomes dissected. For Gergen, relationships are fundamentally tied to language and perception: 'our mental vocabulary is essentially a vocabulary of relationship' (*Relational Being* 69–70). Gergen ties this thought to an impulse to punctuate the fundamental otherness and unknowability of other persons: 'How can we know what is in the mind of another? We are presented with their words [ ... ] Yet, we have no access to another's mind save through what we take to be its expressions' (*Relational Being* 118). The plurality inherent in relational perspectives entails an acceptance that part of the world will always remain unknowable.



This also happens to be a cornerstone in Glissant's relational poetics which portrays relationality as a mode of adjusting to unknowability. In Isabell Hoving's paraphrase, 'Glissant's poetics [...] argues that the interrelated world can never be completely known' (Hoving 165–6). His meditations are useful in accommodating other uncertainties, such as those about place relations. The interplay of knowledge and emotion generates tension, as life writers become involved in a dynamic of constituting and letting go of a sense of control. Place and travel thus epitomise the constant human struggle to accommodate change, both within and without.

All relationality is a matter of approximation through interpretation of signs. Intentions themselves remain invisible, and Gergen's book illustrates powerfully how little is known of the workings even of human consciousness. A spatial Other such as India with its multitudes of inscrutable inhabitants, invisible signs, inaudible sounds, and only partially decoded messages, presents an even more unknowable otherness than the social others Gergen focuses on. Such a relationship is rendered elusive not only because of the inability of the writer to speak to every single inhabitant but also because of the unfathomable powers of places with their sounds, smells, flavours, colours and temperatures to affect feelings of subjecthood.

Sporadic observations on the relational nature of autobiographical writings have been made from the mid-1970s onwards: Karl Weintraub argues that the meaning of autobiography unfolds in an interaction between individuals and their surroundings, describing autobiography as 'a weave in which self-consciousness is delicately threaded throughout interrelated experience. It may have such varied functions as self-explication, self-discovery, self-clarification, self-formation, self-presentation, self-justification. All these functions inter-penetrate easily, but all are centred upon a self aware of its relation to its experiences' (Weintraub 824). But for the most part, relationality has been conceptualised in accordance with Paul John Eakin's chapter on 'Relational Selves, Relational Lives: The Story of the Story' which directs critical attention to the importance of formative relationships, with reference to family members that shaped the lives of writers of autobiographies. Eakin credits relational appreciation mainly to feminist criticism and women's autobiographies. It is through others that the self is realised, comes into being and is constructed as individual. It is through reconstructive narratives of their own and other people's lives that writers contextualise their own stories.

One of the side effects of a relational enquiry is that it interrogates the binary assumptions of self and other or centre and periphery that have come to underpin relational debates. While deconstructing dichotomies can be seen as a kneejerk reaction triggered by the powerful stimulus of investigating life writing 'After Empire', this kind of enquiry is not restricted to the postcolonial arena. Leigh Gilmore suggests a comparable widening of the relational sphere in an analysis of 'posthuman' writing that depicts life with chronic pain and which 'locates the self/life/writing weave of self-representation in relations of dependence and interdependence across living and non-living matter' (83).

Gilmore's focus on dependency draws attention to a workshop aspect of relational criticism whose terminologies are still in a process of being shaped. In many discussions of life writing, the relational is rather problematically conflated with intersubjectivity, often in an attempt to juxtapose the relational mode with notions of an autonomous self, as Katja Sarkowsky explains (628–9). Relationality encompasses more than mere connection or dependence. These technical-sounding terms insufficiently capture a linkage invested

with emotions and personal history. Relationality involves thinking about contact, not merely experiencing it. For the purposes of this essay, relationality is used to capture a connection endowed with meaning and invested with emotion and responsibility. Relationality emphasises that a connection has been enriched by thought, feeling and the imagination.

### Relationality of place: feeling India

Vassanji's travel narrative attempts to disentangle these factors in his relationship with India while reflecting on life in transit on several levels. Concrete travel is only one typical manifestation. He gives the occasional itinerary and evaluation of the relative merits of different sites and monuments, some of which he prefaces by historical introductions. But the crucial journey for Vassanji is a personal one that takes him back into his family's past and into his own reading history. He is aware of the fact that mobility is part of epistemological growth. To think about travel, transit, and passages, to perform the acts involved in motion and to reflect them in his writing practice help him understand and define his place within life. In a modernised vignette of the topos of *navigatio vitae*, life as a journey, Vassanji links his special relationship with motion and in-betweenness to his diasporic experience:

I remember musing, many years ago when I was a student and would often find myself between cities on a train in North America, that it could go on forever, this journey, for all I cared, I could give my life to this long moment of rolling and roaring, of endless rhythm. I was a displaced person, like Zeno's arrow going someplace else even as I was stationary in another, and a train ride vivified the feeling of constant motion, going somewhere endlessly. (18)

The evocation of a staple experience in fictions about protagonists in their formative years makes for a frustrating memory in the musings of a middle-aged traveller expected to approach India in expert mode. The above train of thought comes to a mundane halt:

Trains here in India are the next best thing to endless constant motion. [ ... ] What better way than to sit in a train responding to the ancestral homeland, every scene and every moment full of meaning and possibility, blooming epiphany? The only torment: the wet washrooms. (Vassanji 19)

He quails before the prospect of visiting the region his forebears have come from: 'They tell me, please come to Gujarat, but not on kite day, a Gujarati festival; it might provide just the opportunity for a riot. - Am I not supposed to be afraid?' (Vassanji 10). Apart from problems of hygiene and communal terror, there is a constant familiar struggle with writing, history, memory—the ever receding frontier of textualising experience: 'the urge persists, and grows, to step into the past, look behind the ruin, the beauty, the enigma—and find coherence, impute meaning and relevance. It's risky, I know, like walking into a dream. (Vassanji 53). Busy enacting his old dream of finally being in India, Vassanji knows that he cannot do that, he can only feel overwhelmed by the thought. In Vassanji's piece of travel-life writing, two unfinishable projects interpellate one another: from the first sentence onwards, India is depicted as being beyond grasp: 'It would take many lifetimes, it was said to me during my first visit, to see of all India. It was January. The desperation must have shown on my face to take in all I possibly

could' (Vassanji ix). And this only concerns the unknown country he visits, the India 'without'.

Space and place are categories which narratology struggles to accommodate, as Mieke Bal confirms: 'few concepts deriving from the theory of narrative texts are as self-evident and have yet remained so vague, as the concept of *space*' (93). Bal defines narrative space as '*location or place as an element of the fabula*' (93), and as 'the topological position in which the actors were situated and the events took place' (93). She clarifies the narrative functions of spaces in binary terms:

Spaces function in a story in two ways. On the one hand, they are only a frame, a place of action. In this capacity a more or less detailed presentation will lead to a more or less concrete picture of that space. The space can also remain entirely in the background. In many cases, however, space is 'schematized': it becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake. Space thus becomes an 'acting place' rather than the place of action. It influences the fabula, and the fabula becomes subordinate to the presentation of space. (Bal 95–6)

For Vassanji, the Indian subcontinent is more than a tourist trap. Even to describe it as a key space to help him unlock a better understanding of family identity does not do the book justice. To activate the imagined place of his ancestral past is both nostalgic and fraught with pain, as he wryly observes in several passages: 'My older son has taken to cricket, and hunting for a lost ball in the bushes with him has brought back memories of my own childhood; it's also given us rashes from poison ivy' (Vassanji 167). In other passages, mundane streets and corners engender flashes of emotional memory which elude communication, even geographical coherence, as Vassanji's conflation of India and Tanzania in the following vignette demonstrates:

I recall a scene in suburban Delhi [...] during a family visit to India. We had taken a bus from our guest house in South Delhi to go to Connaught Circus, the heart of New Delhi. On the way we passed certain residential areas of the city, and glancing at my wife I saw a sudden emotion come over her face. She, who had not been back to Dar es Salaam in over twenty years, was reminded of it by the neighbourhoods we passed through. Such is the meaning of home. How could I possibly explain this to Krishan Chander, whose one ambition seems to be to send at least one of his children 'there'? (Vassanji 50)

'There' is indicative of an otherness of longing, it gestures towards the great wide world abroad. Vassanji's idealisation of India is matched by an idealisation of the West in most of his middle-class interlocutors whose children either already live abroad or hope to go soon. Their relationship with the West is invested with as much emotion as Vassanji's own. Being motivated by his dreams of making an imaginary place relation into a real life experience, he elicits and collects other people's declarations of *fernweh*, the longing to be elsewhere. The emotions engendered by places are something of a *leitmotif* throughout his memoir: 'I am going to the state of my ancestors, Gujarat, where people speak a language I speak. How do I feel?' (Vassanji 36). Feelings are both a challenge to language, and part of the language of place. In this sense his book is less a portrait of India than a personal rumination about limitations to the language of memory as provoked by a place experience. For Vassanji, place is where human relationships become tangible. He elevates setting to a creative force. His is essentially a romanticising view of place, motivated by a conventional sense of materialist presence. This is epitomised by the satisfaction the narrator expresses when receiving an edible gift:

It is an emotional send-off. So much had been expected of this visit, but it's too short. This has been a meeting of minds, but even more a meeting of hearts. This was India's embrace, its kiss, to an Indian however many times removed.

And yes, somebody gave me a box of mithai to take back with me. (Vassanji 39)

Postcolonial writings have long been preoccupied with rectifying false assumptions about the 'within' and the 'without' which Vassanji's title alludes to. From Frantz Fanon's analytic rage at racist interpretations of black skin colour to Ashis Nandy, Ganesh Devy and Gauri Viswanathan's deconstructions of the indirect invasion of the mind via English literary education, a mismatch of that which is visible to the world 'without' and that which is felt 'within' is central to the postcolonial experience, and, by corollary, theory. Trying to come to terms with this mismatch, however broadly conceived and intensely felt constitutes one of the motivations that have drawn writers and critics to their desks.

Vassanji's interiorisation of India as a 'place within' gives rise to the question in how far the term relationship is applicable to places. The connection between individuals and places is uneven. The difference between a human being and a place is clear; while one is clearly bounded and contained, at least physically, the other is a vague collective term which cannot reciprocate any of the emotional energy invested in it. Place relations can be broken down into memories, often of other people associated with a place, reducing the actual place to a mere conductor of emotional energy. For Vassanji, internalisation of place is prompted and mediated by stories and books. It is the narrated, 'worded', processed experience which he can own. The 'India without' he traverses—unwieldy, chaotic and cacophonous—and the 'India within' which he recounts to his readers reflect different ways of knowing. What he sees 'without' still lacks meaning, explanation, and most importantly of all, emotional presence.

### Text relationality: writing struggles

Through reading, travelling and writing, Vassanji relates past and present in his imagination. His traveller persona during his Indian trips is clearly defined as a writer, and quite a renowned and prominent one at that. Similar to Naipaul, he travels 'for a book' as much as he travels for himself. He is invited to give talks, introduced to literati, treated to poetry jams, is moved to the front of queues (Vassanji 18).

In writing about visiting his ancestral homeland, Vassanji follows a long line of forebears in Anglophone and diasporic literatures. His passage to India echoes E. M. Forster's novel as much as the section of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* which inspired its title. V. S. Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) charts the author's 1962 visit to confront what he terms his Indian 'nerves' (8, 516), 'the darkness that separated me from my ancestral past' (516), reluctantly approaching a country framed by the 'abjectness and defeat and shame' (517) of his family's indentured past. Such raw postcolonial discourse is predictably absent from Vassanji's book. Though deeply concerned with East African decolonisation, he keeps a distance from the postcolonial lexicon. In its place, he employs a vocabulary of self-fashioning, identification and personal growth that links the experience of his nation's independence with his own adolescence and growing awareness:

My first serious engagement with India began when as a student strolling along the aisles of a university book sale one spring in Cambridge Massachusetts, I happened upon a remaindered copy of Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography and quickly—though I cannot say with what expectation—picked it up. Something of the liberal expansiveness of the author, educated in Harrow and that other Cambridge, in England, and his generosity of spirit, appealed to this expatriate student barely out of his teens and foundering upon questions of identity on alien shores. I was of Indian descent, born in East Africa, had recently seen the independence of my country, amidst great euphoria and hope for Africa. Nehru wrote his autobiography (as he did his *Discovery*) during one of his several terms in jail during India's own struggle for independence. Reading him I became aware of India as a real, modern country—as opposed to a mythical one—a recent phenomenon [ ... ] I was reading, for the first time after a colonial education, words written by an Indian, and I felt a swell of pride in that. [ ... ] Gandhi brought India even closer: he had lived many years in South Africa, and he had given an opinion regarding the so-called Indian Question in East Africa (Vassanji xii–xiii).

Travel and books, spatial and metaphoric mobility, come together in forging the self-image of the writer as explorer that Vassanji makes for and about himself. In this process books not only help structure the experience of place. They are instrumental in managing a place change central to Vassanji's narrative logic, both here and in his fictional works: narrated places, story places and individuals in and from stories are perceived and depicted as more real than the ones encountered 'without'.

In defining relationality, one runs the risk of producing a concept which is so general as to become meaningless. Even the most personal confessions and revelations entail collateral narratives locating the narrator within social parameters and implicating other individuals, places, and monuments. With this in mind, 'relational writing' is almost tautological, since 'relate' etymologically covers a dimension of telling. Can any text be 'unrelational'? Kenneth Gergen explicitly addresses the process of writing as a means of illustrating the polyphony of the self. Writing is exposed as a relational tool. It only makes sense to write in order to reach a reading and potentially writing Other, real or imagined, and in producing a piece of writing, an author makes the offering of a relationship, and possibly enacts both parts of Self and Other. However, the act of writing to the unknown has its ambiguities. Language is felt to be a set of confining conventions; writing is 'layered'. As Gergen has argued, all writing has a communal dimension: 'writing is fundamentally an action within a relationship; it is within relationship that writing gains its meaning and significance, and our manner of writing simultaneously invites certain forms of relationship while discouraging or suppressing others' ("Writing as Relationship").

For Vassanji, India, the place where he finds himself both recognised and completely lost, or scattered, becomes a heterotopian mirror where he confronts, not so much his genealogical past, but his professional one, as a storyteller. If India is a place 'within', this title exposes the unknown status of the writer's own psyche, the black box of memory from which Vassanji produces disjointed and uncontrollable stories which he struggles to string into a narrative that can withstand the clear light of day. Encountering the real India without is an uncanny process of doubling, and his textual forebears are a part of this. Ensnared in one of Shimla's landmark colonial relics, the Indian Institute for Advanced Study, formerly the Viceregal Lodge, a building as British-looking as J. K. Rowling's Hogwarts castle, he fantasises about being haunted not only by the poltergeist of Lady Curzon ('England still haunts the place, from a distance' [Vassanji 169]), but also by fictional ghosts:

During the rains a thick swirling fog may overhang the area, its effects enhanced by the white and yellow lamps on posts; and with the grey gothic building in the background the entire place acquires a certain macabreness. If one lingered a little in this night, did not turn away quickly into the embrace of a hearth, then that shadow figure in the near distance who is barely visible might just respond to the call: 'Heathcliff!' (Vassanji 168)

The filmic language in which this fantasy is rendered, under the telling chapter heading of 'A Spell in the Mountains', creates ironic distance to match the irony of the experience itself, of a migrant visitor viewing the Lodge through a Victorian lens. While English books are used to evoke atmosphere, the importance of family as a constituent of identity cannot be recruited from the West. Although his portrayal of Delhi is put under the heading of 'The City of Poets', Vassanji inserts references to the nineteenth century Urdu-Persian poet Ghalib, Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), Attia Hosain's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) and others chiefly to introduce the authority of family and the significance of individual rebellions against patriarchy.

The imagination enables a self-relationality where the different roles and practices an individual assumes are put in relief. A relational mode of enquiry that compares his situation, his meandering, with the local intelligentsia and the numerous academics who act as his guides on his travels yields lists of similarities between Vassanji's life-world and theirs. All of them have the world of books to dip into as an escapist exercise of hide-and-seek or as a source of inspiration. Books and stories constitute shared ground even as they cancel out actual place and location. As a writer he feels less in control than a storyteller, more like a scribe who transcribes or translates stories he is surrounded by:

Monuments tell a story, reflect a mindset; Aibak's tower of victory and his great mosque built over a Hindu temple; Alauddin's vain attempt at a bigger tower; his more practical Hauz Khas water reservoir for the people of Delhi; his fair-trade regulations; Akbar's new capital Fatehpur Sikri for his ideal of a unified India; Shah Jahan's incomparable Taj Mahal for his beloved dead queen, and his new city, Shahjahanabad. Each visitor must surely have a favourite among the monuments that transport him or her to a mood, a vision. (Vassanji 94)

India becomes a master-narrator who casts the former creator and lord of all he surveys as a character in a narrative which constantly eludes comprehension. His journeys frame a variety of selves and roles which are often in conflict: the renowned Canadian academic and writer is expected to attend a symposium in one location while the private individual M. G. Vassanji would prefer his itinerary to continue elsewhere:

At this point I would have preferred to make Calcutta my next stop. [ ... ] But Trivandrum, Kerala, needs me; there are two emissaries from the south to tell me that, to beseech me to come; there is a workshop there they would like me to attend. (Vassanji 18)

Thrown into the map of India, Vassanji loses the constructed control granted by his status as the inventor of stories.

There is a moment where Vassanji's monologic stance breaks down in a moment of striking clarity, if not quite self-recognition. This occurs in a chapter which recounts his meeting with the novelist Mulk Raj Anand, one of the first Indian authors writing in English to gain international renown, notably with *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936). This passage, marking the centre-point of the book, could have been used to signal an epiphany, a home-coming, the culmination of Vassanji's Indian quest: to meet an Alter Ego, a living monument, a fellow novelist who not only precedes him in the field of 'the Indo English



novel' (Vassanji 222), but an Ishmaili like him; a relative to boot, who inscribes a gift with an affectionate greeting from 'Uncle Mulk' (Vassanji 222). Instead of witnessing a writerly apotheosis, readers are confronted with an anticlimactic tussle between two alpha males who purport to know little about one another, and to care even less:

I am a little wary about meeting a writer with such a reputation. He knows nothing about me, and my knowledge of him is superficial. My only interest at this point is to take a look at him and to confirm the family connection, hopefully find out more about that. [...]  
He takes up an aggressive posture at the start. (Vassanji 219)

Anand is not the only one to take up such a posture, and it is stubbornly maintained by both combatants from start to finish. Vassanji's somewhat petulant account of his tête-à-tête with Anand is ripe with rivalry. The age gap becomes a peg for a patronising portrayal of Anand's shorter stature, his deafness, his 'memories of relevance and glory' (Vassanji 222). These passages evince a violence Vassanji might just as well have explicitly directed at himself. Instead, it is Anand's self-centredness which is exposed: 'What can this old man tell me? But Mulk, my witness, is deaf, and his interest is focused on something else, his own life, about which he goes relentlessly on' (Vassanji 221). In a similar vein, he lampoons Anand's penchant for name-dropping: 'He talks about Nehru, Muhammad Iqbal, Gandhi. But his life in London, where he fraternised with the literati of the time, including the Bloomsbury group, he remembers with pride, speaks of with confidence. It's the favourite soundtrack' (Vassanji 219). Vassanji's sarcasm is as jarring as his indictment of inauthenticity. Having severally professed his own inability to fathom the thoughts of the Indians he meets, he now surmises that Anand's writings about the lower castes 'don't have the immediacy of caste experience that a native Indian reader might demand' (Vassanji 221). The insider-outsider who worries about opportunistically exchanging one diasporic hat for another implies that Anand's expressions of Anglophilia make him less Indian than he ought to be, and so does the time he spent abroad: 'What's so special about returning to India? He should know, he returned having missed a crucial part of its history, but I keep quiet' (Vassanji 219).

Quiet, except for four strikingly venomous pages. In them, a volcano of anger erupts, aimed at least partially at the project of speaking about the self: the writerly ancestor Anand whom Vassanji meets, but to whom he cannot get through, due to what David Lodge wryly calls a 'deaf sentence' and to a loss of focus which Vassanji attributes to age. 'This is not a discussion but a one-way discourse' (Vassanji 221). In other words, it is a synopsis of the writing process as it is felt by the writing subject, the nightmare scenario of trying to formulate one's own history and confronting one's fear of falling short. In meeting a writer who lives in the past, Vassanji shifts to an evasive third person narrative that masks a fear of aging, of looking into the distorted mirror of a future he dreads: 'What does a writer do at this stage of life, his energies spent, his vogue diminished?' (Vassanji 219). No writer is more equal than the other; there is no revelation to be found here, only the unnerving prospect of a potentially monologic stance in telling about one's life — 'It's only oneself one ever discovers'. The relationship between life and text remains as elusive as ever, or even more than ever in Vassanji's encounter with his personal ghost of Christmas to Come. It is in the passages portraying his failed encounter with the figure of a writer that Vassanji's struggle with India morphs into an agnate battle, the enactment of an inner joust with the compulsion to write, to live writing.<sup>5</sup>



## Conclusion

Life writing has become one of the most vibrant workshops within literary criticism, and beyond. One of the reasons for the rise in interest in life writing is its meta-fictional potential to enable inter- and trans-disciplinary contact and collaboration, for instance between literary studies, history and psychology. Key to the self-image of an age obsessed with individual self-documentation and open access on the one hand and anxieties about post-privacy exposure on the other, life writing has grown from a collective genre term into a phenomenon, and it is being described as something processual: 'a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience' (Eakin 100) and as 'an ongoing and often contentious engagement with humanistic discourses of identity and truth' (Gilmore 83). The elusiveness of the self-writing process which used to be a valid reason to dismiss its literary quality, now contributes to making it the most appropriate and trustworthy response to a stream of self-perceptions in overwhelming and fragmented life-worlds. For individuals such as Vassanji, whose histories are marked by post-Empire displacement and diasporic hyphenation, life writing has been an especially exhilarating instrument for filling gaps in official history, unearthing silenced voices, and writing belonging into being.

Writing establishes patterns and Vassanji approaches this normalising activity with a degree of weary, self-critical mistrust. His authoritative stance periodically collapses as Vassanji alternates between his western visitor status and his membership in a minority. In some places, it is the Gujarati he speaks which becomes his admission ticket to a community, in another anecdote he is thrilled to spot his uncommon family name on a placard. The act of writing forces him to make an *essai* of experience: his travels become a chain of introductions, tableaux and brief, subjective attempts at closure. Books, films and well-known anecdotes are recruited to support his narrative, not as evidence or truth claims but as a way of breaking the relative monotony of his reminiscences: he searches for a way of building coherence as much as any truths about India that have not already been published. In referring to his journeys as a pilgrimage (in his final sentence he refers to the book as 'a token of pilgrimage' [Vassanji 423]), he accommodates the (for him) most uncomfortable aspects of his Indian encounter, the confrontation with communal violence and the religious sources to which he attributes these. Instead of revelation or redemption, he ends on observations about circularity, the future next visit, the inconclusiveness of his project, which he renders in the shape of a dialogue with one of his many hosts. Travel and narrative still form the core of his belief system of how to align life and the imagination, but how and why they matter and are made to matter has acquired a new interrogative potential.

The Indian scholar, musician and novelist Amit Chaudhuri has produced a poignant reflection on the relationship between life and writing, collective events and individual interpretations. He pins down the relationship between the global scope, the 'big picture' of Empire and the personal sphere of experience and meditates on the nature of that word 'After' which connects them as follows:

It might be said that freedom and Partition, which would affect my parents' lives profoundly, were met by them with a certain degree of incomprehension and even indifference; for key moments, unlike their representation later in texts, do not really have clear outlines, and might not even be perceived as having really happened [...] The human reaction to change, whether personal or in the form of historical events, is extremely complex, a

hiatus of the mystery or incomprehension of a response, not allowed for in official versions of history. (Chaudhuri)

It seems to me that the time lag Chaudhuri pinpoints here is key to understanding the challenge of trying to understand the relationship between life and writing, and even in making sense of memory, traumatic or otherwise. What a writer can achieve is an attempt to pave a path between experience and text and to explore the myriad of relations and encounters ‘within’ and the formative role of writing, reading and books in general that have led to the journey ‘without’ and its visible product, the book.

## Notes

1. Vassanji has tended to be dismissive of these and other critical labels. He has contributed to the material postcolonial scholars work with. He is the co-founder (with his wife, Nurjehan Aziz) of *The Toronto South Asian Review* (now *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*) and edited an essay collection titled *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature* (1985). However, he likes to distance himself from discussions of diasporic literature. During a conference on his oeuvre held in London in 2013, he opined that the complicated terminologies stand in the way of readers’ just enjoying the stories.
2. The term is moreover used in other disciplines, notably theology and pedagogy, exemplified in George Allan and Malcolm D. Evans, eds., *A Different Three Rs for Education: Reason, Relationality, Rhythm* (2006).
3. A laudable exception would be the late Bart Moore-Gilbert’s chapter on ‘Relational Selves’ in *Postcolonial Life-Writing, Culture, Politics, and Self-Representation* (2009).
4. Relational sociology is succinctly characterised in Pierpaolo Donati, *Relational Sociology, a New Paradigm for the Social Sciences* (2012). Donati addresses the danger of making the concept of relationality, which he sees as “‘the unknown object”, virtually the *terra incognita* of social relations’ too unwieldy, as well as distinguishing it from relativism (3–7). Glissant, too, operates with ideas of interdependency as a characteristic of a decolonised state of being: ‘Gradually, premonitions of the interdependence at work in the world today have replaced the ideologies of national independence that drove the struggles for decolonization’ (143).
5. In a recent chapter, Hermione Lee offers a poignant synopsis of similar moments of encounter between notable literati and their textual records. She highlights shared patterns across different generations of writers. Her critical focus on techniques of remembering indicates a suggestive route relational life writing criticism might fruitfully expand on.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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